

# A world locked in simplistic oppositions. The interpretive statements of lower secondary school students

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This article considers the consequences of rejecting axiological ambiguity in the sphere of human experiences and reflection, as observed in statements made by lower secondary school children as part of a study Teaching language and literature in secondary school in light of the new core curriculum. The negative consequences are indicated of interpreting the world as one locked in the values of extreme opposition, based on an analysis of students' interpretations of *Balladyna* by Juliusz Słowacki and *Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising* by Miron Białoszewski. The risks may include alienating the student from reality, as well as the reformulation of values into a set of anti-values, which excludes the possibility of reaching interpersonal agreement. Constructing a personal axiological system on this basis can occur only at the cost of discrediting the values of others, who are denied the right to have them from the outset. In such a world, there is no place for dialogue about values differing from those already held.

KEYWORDS: literary studies; analysis and interpretation; teaching of literature; core curriculum; values.

The world of the traditional fairy tale is one of axiological clarity in the perception of the world and the person. There is a clear-cut division of the roles of characters who are unambiguously good or bad, unambiguously just or unjust, unambiguously noble or mean. This clarity carries within it another tenet: in such a world, goodness always wins, evil is punished. The dream to find oneself in a fairy tale world – and everyone succumbs to it – has an archetypal nature: it stems from the primordial longing for a safe world that has a fully ordered axiology.

Young children are brought into this moral (ethical) order so that they can acquire knowledge of the basic categories of evaluating

human life. Sharp oppositions in the juxtaposed categories are meant to clearly show the differences between them. However, inconsistencies already exist between the fairy-tale image and reality in a child's perception of the world, which surface when inconvenient questions appear. They frequently result from a confrontation between the values presented in a fairy tale and those present in the real world and mass media. Then we hear, for instance: Why does our friend piglet have to change into a chunk of meat on the plate? Does a nice cabbage head really dream only of being chopped up and eaten? Does all it says, its laughter and joy exist only to end up in somebody's belly? Do we also exist for this reason? Those who answer try hard not to destroy

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the unequivocal vision of the world, but this is not easy when trying to satisfy an inquisitive child. This elementary experience makes us aware of the artificiality of the initial dream of clarity or, to be more precise, the dream of subordinating the sphere of values and valuation only to unequivocal oppositions.

The dream of living in the axiological world of the fairy tale is not quite so alien to contemporary adults. Agata Bielik-Robson explored the ambiguous ways of modernity. She pointed out that one of the basic experiences of modernity is the experience of ambivalence, close to the Romantic formula and full of tension: the simultaneous experiencing of contradictory, mutually exclusive states. But this existential experience is also accompanied by a strong tendency to remove it from the language of discourse, which thus was becoming more unequivocal, and falsified what it communicated, as it froze reality in “schematic polarisations” (Bielik-Robson, 2008, p. 48). Here, Bielik-Robson explains the somewhat “natural” causes of escaping to simplification:

almost no one is able to stand up to this tension; almost everyone, sooner or later, weakens and chooses an unambiguous solution, which removes them from the enchanted and accursed cycle of life [...] thus, modernity is as much a great revelation of vital energy as it is a constant Exodus from life towards that which is constant, tangible, permanent, certain – and, by contrast, even more stable and dead than all the pre-modern order taken together (Bielik-Robson, 2008, p. 60).

Ambivalence and the experience of ambiguity, from which the modern human escapes, have always been part of human experience, already described by 16<sup>th</sup> century essayist de Montaigne in *Attempts* (1985). But in the pre-modern world, they were most often “relegated” to the authorities, who mitigated their drastic inconsistency, imploring the opposing sides. The experience of modernity turned ambivalence into an everyday experience, commonly felt. But this commonality did not

protect a person from escaping to an unambiguous world: the world of authorities in extremely polarised opposition, freeing one from a feeling of guilt, responsibility, as they enabled one to be the holder of the only truth. The degree to which this can be immoral and maleficent was shown by the totalitarian systems of the modern world, which were so often accompanied by a sense of complete innocence on the part of the perpetrators of evil, hiding behind the ethics of obedience to superior authorities (cf. Arendt, 1998; Bauman, 2009; Tischner, 2003). All in all, modernity, with its 20<sup>th</sup> century totalitarian systems, revealed how dangerous and ultimately tragic can be the escape from tiresome and ambiguous personal ethical choices, placing responsibility on the conscience of others, especially “ideologised consciences”, abstracted from individual responsibility in the name of a party, nation or humankind.

Does the danger of such an escape threaten us in the postmodern world? Georges Minois turns this inconvenience, tension resulting from ambivalence, that “affirmation of contradictions” into a condition of redemption, perceiving hell in the “choice of only one option” (Minois, 1996, p. 383). Michał P. Markowski, looking for the bases of a new legitimization of humanism and following in the footsteps of Richard Rorty, sees its mission: “in stimulating and developing imagination, in extending the space of doubt in established judgements, creating communities that read, who as a result see more and have a broader scope” (Markowski, 2013, p. 27). He also points out that each culture is multilingual, for various languages exist within the same language, describing reality from various perspectives, where sensitivity and imagination are most of all the “ability to use various languages” (Markowski, 2013, p. 60). However, these voices are accompanied by extremely different ones, which emphasise the necessity to choose unambiguous axiological solutions. For, in the postmodern world,

as is remarked among others by Markowski, a strong tendency coexists to exclude other languages, to impose one language on others, and to force it to be considered the only true one (cf. Markowski, 2013, p. 60). This has different causes, one being the problem of the scope of human freedom (Dziemidok, 2013). As a result, the dream of living in a fairy-tale world – despite historical experiences indicating its particular cruelty, when the axiological pattern of the fairy tale is embodied in reality, when the world is divided only into white (friends, true, valuable) and black (strangers, dishonest, valueless) – turns out to be one of the most durable.

### **The sphere of values in the core curriculum**

In the new core curriculum – as presented by Sławomir J. Żurek – the sphere of axiology is based on five ordered triads, which include values fundamental to our culture: truth – goodness – beauty; faith – hope – love; freedom – equality – fraternity; God – honour – homeland; solidarity – independence – tolerance (Żurek, 2013). However, if the triads are to be implemented in the educational process, they must be preceded – to use the terminology of Barbara Myrdzik – by an “updating of values”, as this is a necessary condition for their authentic subjectification (Myrdzik, 2006, p. 102; Włodarczyk, 2008). For, according to Stanisław Bortnowski (2013, p. 203):

The verbal acceptance of values is not important, as they then remain only declarative values; they must be internalised, that is, fully accepted. Values cannot function as slogans, impersonally; this is a step towards self-deception, towards double-thinking: officially “yes”, unofficially “no”.

It must be admitted that the provisions of the core curriculum for lower secondary school concerning the sphere of values and valuation at subsequent stages of education

enable a coherent, integrated narrative to be constructed, providing students at subsequent stages of education with the opportunity to build an ever more complicated and intrinsically deepened axiological identity, relating to their stage of development and process of maturation. Żurek indicated the main foundations of axiological interdependence, which allow “values to be updated” (and, as a consequence, implemented), thereby becoming part of the students’ experience. Thus, at the second stage of education (grades 4–6 of primary school), a student should first of all learn to recognise oppositional values (such as love – hate; truth – lie) in cultural texts – as “this type of dichotomy is the most comprehensible to a child at this age” (Żurek 2013, p. 15). At the next stage of education (lower secondary school), this axiological framework – continued and developed with subsequent oppositional terms – becomes more complicated as a result of combining it with values relating to the existential sphere and various types of social, national, religious, ethical or cultural conditions. As a result, the lower secondary school student has the opportunity to build his or her own subjectified axiological identity, as just following authorities will not suffice at this stage. At upper secondary school, the process relating to values and valuation becomes even more complicated, providing the opportunity to concentrate and deepen the understanding and experiencing of values (MEN, 2009; Żurek, 2013).

The remaining overarching problem is how to introduce a student to the sphere of values and valuation. The effects of this determine whether a student’s axiological sensitivity really becomes broader and deeper, or whether he/she stops at a lower, basic level, hindering or even precluding not only the development of analytical and interpretational skills, but also of empathy, which – as Anna Janus-Sitarz (2014, p. 9) wrote – “should prevent the existence in society of the phenomena of exclusion due

to nationality, race, religion, disability, age, sex, sexual orientation or social status". Studies on the degree of implementation of the core curriculum in lower secondary school reveal a dangerous trend of these students in stopping at the stage of valuation typical for the primary school level – a stage of extremely oppositional values, leading to various interpretational simplifications.

### **The flight of students towards unambiguity**

The focus of attention is on selected assignments verifying analytical-interpretational skills from a test developed for a large scale study of the degree to which the core curriculum in lower secondary schools was implemented. Two assignments concerned a fragment of *Balladyna* by Juliusz Słowacki, and one on a fragment of *Pamiętnik z powstania warszawskiego* [*Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising*] by Miron Białoszewski. The results of the study *Dydaktyka literatury i języka w gimnazjum w świetle nowej podstawy programowej* [*Teaching language and literature in lower secondary schools in light of the new core curriculum*] discussed here concern the second chapter of the core curriculum (analysis and interpretation) for the Polish language in lower secondary school and includes the results obtained in the northern voivodeships of Pomorskie, Warmińskomazurskie, Kujawsko-Pomorskie, Zachodniopomorskie, and Podlaskie.

Juliusz Słowacki's *Balladyna* is a romantic drama written in 1834. The title character is a country girl who, as the result of ruthlessness, intrigue and crime, becomes the wife of a prince. After his death, she rids the palace of all rivals to the throne and takes the crown of the kingdom. In the finale, several complaints are raised against her rule, she issues the death sentence on a felon, but justice descends from the heavens, as *Balladyna* is killed by lightning.

The tragedy starts with the intrigue of Prince Kirkor seeking candidates for his wife in the countryside. On the advice of a hermit living in the area, he decides to marry the girl who is able to gather the most raspberries in the forest. The competitors are two sisters, Alina and *Balladyna*, who differ in appearance and character. Alina collects more raspberries than lazy *Balladyna*. When they meet in the forest, they begin quarrelling, and in effect, *Balladyna* kills her sister. She returns with a full jug of raspberries and inform the prince that Alina fled with her lover.

Simultaneously, the author is also telling a parody, the story of *Goplana* – a nymph living in a lake who falls in love with a peasant without reciprocity, so she turns him into a silly royal. The drama is modelled on the works of Shakespeare, references are found here to *Macbeth* and *Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Miron Białoszewski's *Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising*, written in 1967, is an account of the Warsaw Uprising against the occupying Germans in 1944. The special value of this work lies in the fact that it describes the experience of civilians, who were forced into involuntary heroism by historical circumstances. Białoszewski used the convention of oral storytelling to tell the story.

Krzysztof Biedrzycki, in looking at how *Balladyna* was received in lower secondary school, noted its simplified reading, which stresses the simplicity and unambiguity of the fairy-tale plot about a good sister and an evil sister. The plot ends with the triumph of justice, as the evil sister is punished by God's sentence. He emphasised that such a simplified reception was the effect of "selective" reading, "alongside the text" (Biedrzycki, 2012, p. 242), even though "it is a tragedy built on ambiguity and ambivalence" (Biedrzycki, 2012, p. 247). He stressed that even though this is a fairy tale, it is a subversive fairy tale, dark and funny at the same time.

According to Biedrzycki, a deepened and ambiguous interpretation of the tragedy is

possible most of all when the entire text is read or the fragments which clearly show the coexistence of a serious subplot and its mocking continuation in the comic subplot (Biedrzycki, 2012). The fragment used for the study was a one-dimensional, serious fragment, in which the raspberry picking sisters met in the forest, compared their harvest for the matrimonial contest, and ended their meeting with the murder of Alina by Balladyna. Despite this limitation, even here it was possible to take a more careful look at what may have seemed obvious on the surface

Two questions had to be answered by all three grades of lower secondary school students. The first one was: "Write what the heroines feel and how they treat each other: (a) how Alina treats Balladyna; (b) how Balladyna treats Alina". Although the assignment was to verify the analytical-interpretational skills of the students (cf. MEN, 2009, I. 1.2.; II.2.2.), their answers to these questions disclosed the predominance of a polarised valuation scale. As a result, the assignment indirectly revealed the way lower secondary students negotiate the subjective sphere of values and valuation (por. MEN, 2009, II.4.1; II.4.2; II.4.3.), leading to the conviction that this sphere constitutes the basis for initiating the formation of other skills. The process, however, is running a course conversely to what was expected. This is of fundamental importance for teaching the remaining skills that enable students to shape their own axiological sensitivity and identity.

The essays from all grades of the students participating in the study are aligned with a simple and unambiguously understood opposition: good vs. evil. The fragment was read and the heroines are characterised from this perspective. Balladyna kills her sister, so she is unambiguously evil. Therefore, according to the rule of binary opposition, Alina must be unambiguously good in the same scene. She is the victim, so in relation to her sister, she cannot be perceived in any different way than good, kind, nice, respectful,

devoted, for this is the only way to emphasise the evil of Balladyna – her anger, envy, rage. The problem is that the cited fragment lacks the unambiguous, black-white opposition, and enables the reader to take a closer look at the specificity (and complications) of love, not only sisterly love. Alina loves her sister, but this is not an obstacle to her feeling satisfaction from the raspberry triumph, her being happy (or even boastful) about her advantage, her joking (or even slight mocking) about Balladyna's failure or her joy at defeating her rival. Thus, in this scene, she is not only "tender, delicate and sensitive", kind, calm, understanding, empathic, "speaking with respect", "speaking politely" – as the students usually wrote about her. For true love (Słowacki captured this superbly) – in contrast to its simplified renderings – is not only accompanied by "tenderness, delicacy and sensitivity". This is not to mean that the angelic nature of Alina justifies (relativises) in any way Balladyna's crime. However, it provides the relationship between the sisters with a more human, deeper dimension in this particularly tragic moment.

Most lower secondary school students failed to perceive this complication in their black and white picture of the heroines, although there are exceptions. Some respondents interpreted Alina's feelings and her attitude towards her sister, although the perception of Balladyna also became more complex. Balladyna is most often characterised (in combination with the relationship to her sister) by feelings such as envy, anger, annoyance, greed, egoism ("she wants the prince for herself only"), rage, unpredictability, readiness to smash the jug with raspberries, hatred, hostility, condescension. Sporadic statements appear that reinforce the feeling of hatred in Balladyna at the image of a happy and victorious Alina; she cannot bear her sister's victory and her own defeat and this is why she is ready to kill her; it is emphasised that Balladyna feels defeated, eliminated from the competition for a better life.

The evaluation of Alina's attitude towards her sister even more strongly emphasises its interpretational ambiguity. Some write that Alina could have given the raspberries to her sister (if *Balladyna* had asked), and others that she had no intension of doing so. The tragedy enables each interpretation to be made (one may think that if somebody wants to give something to someone else, the other person should not be forced to ask for it). Statements appear that Alina is slightly haughty, but her sister is most important to her; that "she is nasty, as she boasts of her success in picking raspberries;" "she is happy, because she has a whole jug of raspberries and she will marry the prince". Irony is perceived in Alina's behaviour and speech, „she mocks [*Balladyna*];" "delicate irony". Sometimes, Alina's happiness is combined with (some) disdain for her defeated opponent, which is not explicitly expressed in the text.

These minority opinions – occurring in classes with both the highest and the lowest results obtained in the achievement test – give rise to hope that not all lower secondary students find satisfaction in moving within an unambiguous, polarised scale of values. They indicate that lower secondary school teachers of Polish have some allies among the students, who make it possible not only to deepen the binary valuation scale, but also to make working with the text more attractive in the classroom.

The second question was: "Compare the two selected quotations from *Balladyna* and answer the questions: (a) What is the difference in how the raspberries are perceived by Alina and *Balladyna*? Pay attention to the adjectives describing the raspberries; (b) Why does each sister perceive the raspberries completely differently?" The quotes below present the dialogue between the sisters immediately preceding the crime.

Alina:

Oh, so many raspberries – and how pink they are!  
And pearls of crystal dew on them.

Kirkor's lips so coral,  
Just like these raspberries... [...]

*Balladyna*:

So few raspberries! And how red.  
Like blood. – So few – which way shall I turn?  
I don't know... And the sky is so on fire  
Like blood... Why do you, sun, rise so  
bloodily?

(Słowacki, 1974, pp. 395–396)

The task verified a compound skill, the combination of an analytic element and interpretational one (cf. MEN, 2009, II.2.2.; II.3.1.). As in the prior assignment, an extremely contrastive scale of valuation determined the interpretational line of most responses. To the opposition of good-evil from the prior task, students presented the opposition of optimism-pessimism, attributing only a positive value to optimism (Alina), and only a negative value to pessimism (*Balladyna*). This pattern was universal, regardless of grade, school, or results obtained. It can be surmised that the source was the association between the colour of raspberries as seen by Alina ("pink") with the commonplace expression of "rose-coloured glasses". As a result, Alina, who sees pink raspberries, is the one who looks at everything through the "rose-coloured glasses" that is to say an optimist. By way of an automatic opposition, the evil *Balladyna* must be a pessimist and perceive everything "gloomily". Therefore, the optimistic and cheerful Alina sees many raspberries and can collect a full jug (every optimist succeeds), and the pessimistic *Balladyna* sees few raspberries and cannot collect enough of them (every pessimist fails).

The heroines' perception of reality and their inner structure hinge upon the above opposition. Optimistic Alina is cheerful and judges everything as beautiful, colourful, for she is good, while pessimistic *Balladyna* judges everything to be awful (bloody), for she is evil. It is sometimes emphasised that the optimistic Alina did not really care for

Kirkor and winning, as it was only a happy game for her. Therefore, she collected more raspberries. In addition, she collected all of them, even not yet ripened ones (this would result from the fact that an optimist is not too demanding), and Balladyna chose only the red (ripe) ones, and therefore had a lesser amount (as if excessive demands were the source of a pessimist's failure).

All students noticed the difference in the perception of raspberries by the heroines, but they sought the causes of this discrepancy mainly in the aforementioned oppositions. They combined them with the opposition of character (good–evil), disposition (cheerful–gloomy), sometimes finding in Balladyna's pessimism and gloominess the sources of her emotional problems, and in her raspberry failure – negative self-actualisation (“she approached the issue of raspberries, predicting her own failure, this is why her eyes do not see”).

This way of interpreting Słowacki's work would be interesting, if it did not entail a dangerously simple image of humans, according to which each pessimist must be evil, suspicious and waiting to take another person's life. Pursuant to this line of reasoning, gloominess and pessimism should be almost prosecuted by law, as it is only a matter of time until the murderous instincts of the pessimists will surface and they will start to “hunt the optimists”, to take away the fruits of their labour. On the other hand, every optimist is good, nice, patient, understanding, always cheerful and successful, thus worthy of following. It may be deduced from this that optimism should become a kind of prescribed life attitude. One should only look out for pessimists who – as losers and, by nature, envious – wait for the opportunity to destroy, murder or exploit the optimists.

Other oppositions appear, which governed students' responses. They reflect commonplace stereotypes relating to valuation, although it would be difficult to find any connection to them in the cited fragment of

the text. For example, the difference in perceiving raspberries is explained by the fact that “Balladyna was ugly and wise, while Alina – beautiful and silly” (it can be concluded that the “beautiful and silly” person achieves her goal, for she sees raspberries and can collect them, while the “ugly and wise” person does not), “one was popular with boys, while the other was not” (the popular one saw raspberries, and the unpopular one did not).

It also happens that because an interpretation is governed by an unambiguous evaluative opposition, an exceptionally easy moral judgement is made of someone's conduct in an extreme situation, which consequently may lead to developing the practice of hypocrisy. This was the case for the next assignment, given to second year lower secondary school students. They were asked to attach a heading to a fragment of *Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising* by Białoszewski, in which an army nurse rushes into a shelter with crowded and exhausted people and asks for help in transporting the wounded to a hospital. After a short silence, one volunteer steps out, and then accompanies entire processions, corteges of wounded carried to the insurgents' hospital across a continuously collapsing, fighting and demolished city.

The students did not find the task particularly difficult. Two motifs dominated: the motif of the road and the motif of heroism and sacrifice. The latter one induces anxiety because of the too frequent references to the simple evaluative opposition of hero – coward. Substantiating this dichotomy resulted in an inability to emphasise the value of the person who rushed to help the nurse without discrediting the others, who acted otherwise. Hence the proposed titles: “The only true one” – “because he was the only one who volunteered to help the nurse;” “Heroic assistance” – “because it describes the person who was the only one to rush to help; all the others were sitting and no one moved;” “Assistance” – “because it describes the person

who was the only one to help a wounded woman;” “Insensitivity” – “because nobody wanted to help, and only one person found the courage;” “End of the world” – “because only one person was willing to help the nurse carry a wounded man to hospital”.

In the analysed fragment, the city is already destroyed to such an extent that civilians (just like soldiers who are not fighting) can only be found in cellars, shelters, and other various types of underground structures. However, the hero joins the “corteges” carrying the wounded, so he is not the “only” person providing such assistance, even if he was among those gathered in the shelter. Apparently, a sufficient number of people willing carry the wounded were found in those different underground structures, as the text unequivocally mentions not so much the road followed by the individual helper as much as his road among the throng of other helpers and fighters. It must be admitted that opinions appeared testifying to the fact that helping under such conditions can be considered particularly heroic – and they are not accompanied by a spontaneous negative assessment of all non-heroes. However, most often expressed were opinions of discrediting, contempt for those who did not want to or could not be “heroes”.

All three tasks revealed different ways in which students escaped from ambiguity. They all showed various types of longing for an unambiguous image of the world, in which the ones who are good and love must always be magnanimous, dedicated, never tarnished by malevolence, and their defined attitude towards life (optimism) ensures their success. In such a world, evil is also simply explained: its sources are pessimism, gloominess, and as a consequence, envy and rage. Assessments of human behaviour in extreme situations pose no difficulty, as the world is divided into only the brave and the cowardly, and we shall unconditionally condemn the latter from the position of the moral superiority of the person who always manifests courage.

### **The role of the humanist in shaping pluralist attitudes**

The analysis of the above assignments is not aimed at attacking lower secondary school teachers of Polish for ineffectively implementing the core curriculum in the area of values and valuation. It is rather aimed at drawing attention to a more general problem, which determines the effectiveness of the work of teachers of Polish. It seems that everything will be easier if we divide all of reality only into good and evil, valuable and valueless. Even more so, as such a polarised image of the world dominates in the media, as well as social and political life. This is the reality that is shaping students. Looking at the interval between the extremes is considered spurious or even harmful, as it blurs the picture. The actions of Polish teachers or humanists in general, who problematise this unambiguity, are in opposition to this trend, which, it seems, has dominated contemporary evaluation, making it clear, simple, conquering, and its proponents have no doubt as to which side is always right. Tadeusz Sławek (2014) indicated the alarming consequences of subordinating public life to a binary vision of the world, leading to the disappearance of discourse and substituting it with groups that do not communicate with each other and consider each other as alien, who assault each other with various forms of rhetorical violence, destroying the chance of any agreement.

In a simplified view of the world, there is no place for the person mainly residing in the “between” space. Nor is there a place for the *sacrum*, as Jerzy Nowosielski emphasised, it always had an ambiguous nature, because it also always had a “kenotic aspect, pointing to that which is simply destructive, catastrophic, divisive and tragic” (Nowosielski, 2013, p. 152). There is no place for an awareness that even in dedicating one’s life to good, one may get lost, as: “Everything that is very valuable, intense, gives rise to dreams, desires,



the willingness to get involved, has its dark side” (Dobroczyński, 2014, p. 17).

Jean Baudrillard noted one more danger relating to the desire for unambiguity:

We have been fully possessed by something like a surgical compulsion, imposing upon us the willingness to amputate negative features from things, giving them ideal shapes in the operation of synthesis. Aesthetic surgery: accidental nature of facial features, the face’s beauty or ugliness, its distinctive features, its negative symptoms, all of these should be repaired, adding to its beauty exceeding beauty itself: to create an ideal face, a surgical face. (Baudrillard, 2009, p. 51)

The price of existence in an ideal form is resignation from what is individual and characteristic for a specific subject; resignation from what is alive and evades homogeneity, in favour of what is model and dead. Perhaps it is not as bad as Baudrillard stated, and not everywhere has “that inhuman formalisation of face, speech, sexuality, body, will and public opinion [been] introduced” (Baudrillard, 2009, p. 52), but our reality is undoubtedly close to his vision.

The consequence of the “leukaemia” discussed by the author of *The Transparency of Evil* is the opposite phenomenon: subtracting that which is negative and rooting in it any aspect that is considered good and axiologically valuable. Because ambiguous experiences are inscribed in the human condition, just as are old age, disability or death. Sławomir Mrozek wrote about one of them. He admitted that he linked beauty, goodness – as most do – to health, physical fitness. Meanwhile, to his own astonishment, he had a truly deep experience of beauty and goodness as a result of the touch of his dying wife’s hand (Maria Obrembianka). The unusual nature of that experience made him reflect: “For I am more and more certain that the fundamental torment inflicted upon us, or the fundamental virtue, is ambiguity. It is what needs to be accepted and it [...] comes from

God and it cannot be killed” (Mrozek, 2010, p. 685). “Perhaps”, he emphasises, “there is only one, but great, fundamental sin: the inability to accept ambiguity, the inability to accept its torment” and to agree to a world of “arrogant unambiguity” (Mrozek, 2010, p. 685).

Is there less “arrogant unambiguity” in today’s world? This is doubtful. Against this backdrop, postmodern ethics, disrupting its various regions, seems to be a great ally of the Polish teacher and student, or simply of any person, who does not want to escape from reality. It is sometimes accused of destroying the world of values, as it introduces chaos into the established axiological order, but this chaos perhaps provides the only opportunity to avoid being stuck in a world of frozen dichotomies. Anna Włodarczyk (2008, pp. 120–121) explained: “It is a mistake to believe that postmodernism does not create any values. It is a fact that it rejects the dichotomous division of good and evil, which is particularly visible in contemporary philosophical and sociological thought or art (literature)”. Another “visible” aspect is the effect of giving voice to various types of excluded groups, “others”. Those who were deprived of a voice until recently. Thus, an impression of chaos is created, as those “others” do not necessarily fit into the previously preferred harmonious discourse.

As a rule, students do not read philosophical or sociological texts, and contact with literature and other cultural texts is the only opportunity they have to shape their own axiological identity. This enables them to be open to the lack of clarity and complications of human life. The results of the axiological survey conducted in upper secondary general schools in Warsaw in 2008 revealed that not only lower secondary students and their teachers were losing against the generally predominant “arrogant unambiguity”. A researcher of upper secondary school students, Barbara Gełczewska (2013, p. 112), noted that: “Serious consideration of the school, students, and families is called for in view of the

developmental problem reflected in the sharp polarisation of worldviews”. Gełczewska provided examples in which texts are completely stripped of their ambiguity in order to develop arguments that crush the “opponent”, that is, the person for whom the text has value. Excluding the person who thinks differently from the sphere of values becomes the major tool in a discussion. The world is divided into friends (those who think like us – the “good” ones) and strangers (those who do not think like us – the “bad” ones; Gełczewska, 2013). As a result, dialogue becomes impossible, and Bortnowski’s postulate about the need to argue about values, which can only develop “through the conflict of arguments” (Bortnowski, 2013, p. 203), loses its foundation.

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